

COLONEL SHARPLEY AND THE ALLIGATORS.

BY A TRAVELLING NATURALIST.

There are certain animals in the kingdom of nature peaceable enough, if let alone, but ferocious as tigers in defence of themselves or offspring. Of this sort is the alligator.

In excursions through more southern sections of the United States, I have observed them with much interest. Naturalists, who possess the opportunity, should pay more attention to their habits than has yet been done, for but little reliable information is recorded in books concerning them. The lagoons, bayous, and lakes of Southern Mississippi and Louisiana, are their principal places of resort, and there they may be observed to the best advantage. On a hot summer's day, when the deadly miasmatic steam rises from the surface of one those unhealthy collections, alligators may be seen lying half buried in the ooze or floating dreamily on the surface, apparently careless to all that moves around them. But don't believe they are in earnest. Just let a hunter's dog endeavor to reach his master by a short cut across the lake, and by the time the cur is a hundred feet from shore, every alligator in the drink will be after him. Never did you hear such a splashing and bellowing. Their paddles, noisy as the Talleyrand's, will lash foam from the water, as they strain every muscle to gain the first bite, for of all meats toothsome to an alligator, a dog's is most delicious. Their foul breath ascends in vapor. Their little devilish eyes gleam like a shark's, and poor dog, if he gets half way across before those heavy jaws clump him, he will be lucky enough. But woe to the reptile who is first in the chase; each of the others, as he comes up, will pitch into him with the heartiest hatred, and ten to one he is immolated on the shrine of covetousness, torn into a thousand pieces by his late friends.

In every lake there are certain veterans, who, by virtue of their years, or the fame of former exploits,—most likely their great strength,—are allowed pre-eminence by the rest. But the row becomes serious indeed, when two of this sort,—bull alligators they are styled,—encounter each other. Then Greek meets Greek, Napoleon contends against Wellington, and dire is the strife, for neither party yields until death closes the scene, and one, or both, expires. I once found one, sixteen feet in length, lying upon a sand bar, quite too much exhausted to move. His under-jaw was broken in several places, his bowels were gushing out, and both eyes were gouged. He was, evidently, the victor, and what success his opponent had met with, might be inferred from his horrid condition. We might the conqueror declare "one more such victory will undo me," if, indeed, he were not already lying in the agonies of death. Only three of his teeth remained unbroken of all his goodly palisade of ivory, and those, each thick as my thumb, I secured for my cabinet. No, I am wrong, there was a fourth, which I presented to Capt. Maryatt, who failed, however, to keep his promise of recording the above incident in his book of travels.

VOL. I.—No. I.

It is not generally known that the alligator, like the turtle, lays her eggs upon the land. When ready for this interesting charge, she crawls from the water for some distance into the dense cane-brake, and then paws up, with her immense paddles, big clumps of muddy earth, until a pile is formed a few inches high, and some four feet diameter. Upon this she lays her eggs, then heaps dry leaves above them, with sticks and mud, until the mound is nearly as high as a man's head, and the good lady returns to the element, leaving the heat and moisture to do the rest. As soon as the progeny is hatched, they hasten like ducks, to the water, and if they escape being eaten by the turtles, catfish, or their own tender mammals, they attain, in a few years, a good size, and are allowed to participate in the fights, feasts and frolics of the lake. The great part, however, are destroyed in infancy.

An anecdote is told of an English dandy sportsman, who had come yachting to New Orleans, and penetrated to the interior, for a shy at the game. But his very first excursion to the cane-brake eventuated in his being lost, and lying out alone, amidst such clouds of musquitos as only Vermilion Bay can produce. They almost tapped his heart's blood. Daylight found him on the brink of a lagoon, with an army of alligators in view. Horrified at the sight of the monsters, he struck precipitately into the thicket again, but only to fall over a large one that was egging it upon her huge nest. The reptile struck him over the back with her flexible tail, and knocked him senseless, and had she followed up the blow, he had doubtless made a morning's meal for her ladyship. As it was, he recovered his senses, but with a bruised shoulder, and some time the next day returned to the house, minus gun, hat and curiosity. The yacht soon cleared homeward bound, and that was the last of John Bull.

Every man who has visited St. Louis, recollects the two specimens in Koch's Museum, that engaged in a fight right before a crowd of spectators, and could not be separated until they fell over the balcony into the street, and were both killed by the shock. The incident was so novel, that the enterprising proprietor turned it to good account, and secured more visitors by exhibiting the deceased champions than even by his famous "Museum," the eighth wonder of the world. In several points there is a resemblance of habits between the alligator and the large, thick-shelled turtle. Both love to bask in sunrays so hot as to fry up everything else; both are highly tenacious of life; slowly aroused to anger, but spunky as a demon when their ire is excited; both possess the most powerful instruments in their front paddles that are known in mechanics, as may be seen in their skeletons, clumsy, but mighty in leverage. There is one striking point of difference, however, the turtle being the most timid animal in the lake; starting from his log, and plunging into the water at the slightest alarm, while the alligator will lie and watch you with a calmness that is indicative of an innocent bear.

And now for the best anecdote on this subject. Colonel Sharpley, a land speculator, took his way in the month of September, 1837, to the Louisiana land office, to make certain entries of valuable

tracts. The day was hot, the dust smotheringly thick, the air perfectly still. About the middle of the afternoon he arrived at Moore's ferry on Plum Bayou, a sheet of stagnant water, filled from the river in spring freshets, and serving for a breeding pond of fish and reptiles the balance of the year. The ferryman lived a mile the other side, as ferryman always do; but for the convenience of travellers, he had suspended a cow's horn on a sapling, with the tacit understanding that he would come whenever he heard it. Now, I never could sound a note even on a French bugle, although I have heard Gambati blow two trumpets at a time, and as Colonel Sharpley's lungs were of the weakest, he didn't even attempt the cow's horn, harder, however, than fire trumpets. Gambati would find it so. And now there is our traveller, there is the bayou; the ferry-boat occupying one side of the picture, the man and his horse the other. Land speculators are a shifty set, and up to most emergencies, but the Colonel was nonplussed here. He saw too plainly the danger of swimming, for a glance at the mud bank a little ways to the left, brought to view several long, black, bumpy, objects that *might* be logs, but were probably alligators, ready to be aroused at the slightest splash.

So the speculator sat down under an umbrella-looking beech, pulled out his field notes, and began to make calculations for future profit. But nobody came; night drew on; he became weary of his estimates, and putting up his book, began to wonder what he should do. It was ten miles back to the nearest house, and the probability was, that if the ferryman had no fires from his own side of the water, he would not come down for a day or two. The idea of camping out was a disagreeable one; though, barring mosquitoes and the prospect of a bad cold, he cared nothing for the danger. But little was stirring around him. Occasionally, a long, lank garfish would turn a neat caper out of water, and disappear again, as if satisfied with the exploit. Then a kingfisher or two screamed above some fry they had caught, and flew off in amicable mood, as old friends should. Then a snowy white crane, on stilts long as a Savoyard's, waded within fifty feet of him; now groping under water for a morsel, now pluming its spotless feathers with coquettish care.

But such objects have little charm for land speculators. Colonel Sharpley arose and glanced around for an idea. One puff at the cow's horn showed him the fallacy of the attempt; for the sound he made was about as loud and harsh as the notes of its original wearer. A pile of drift wood hard by suggested the notion of a raft; and thankful for the thought, at it he went with double speed, determined, if he could get across to the ferry-boat, to return with that, and convey his horse over. The substratum was soon laid with large pieces of wood, dry as tinder, which he tied firmly together by grape vines. These were crossed tier above tier by others, all being well tied at the corners; and thus he had a structure built in half an hour, large and buoyant enough for anybody. A stiff piece of bark sufficed for a paddle, and the Colonel boldly launched out, congratulating himself upon his ingenuity. But

he had not gone more than half across, before the knobbed back of a bull alligator broke water within a few feet of him, and he saw that he should have company on his way of a dangerous sort. Every time he dipped his paddle on that side, the big upper jaw would open a short way, and rows of glistening pegs, four inches long, dripping in slime, met his trembling gaze.

No wonder then that his track was tortuous and his progress slow. The monster made no attempt to stop him; and now the ferry-boat was but a few yards ahead, and hope was becoming buoyant, when things took another turn.

It will be recollected that every lake of this sort has several of these veteran bulls, whose prowess secures them from all attack except from each other. The large one, that had accompanied Colonel Sharpley, was so deeply scared as to prove him a quarrelsome case, and when, as it happened, another one of the same sort, which was prowling about, approached the raft, the motion was taken as a challenge, and a desperate fight immediately commenced. Each seized the other by the head and commenced lashing with their tails, making some such turmoil as a whale with its flukes.

Instantly, the paddle was dashed from the Colonel's hands, his eyes were filled with spray, his raft upset, and it was all that he could do to recover his footing. All this was bad enough, but read further.

The alligator, as a tribe, is pugnacious, and the sound of a fight calls them together as naturally as it does Kentucky miasm. So it was but a few minutes until the little raft was surrounded by a whole shoal of them (alligators, not Kentuckians), young and old, dividing their eager gaze between the strife and its unlucky object. The speculator stood abashed. He had often been the centre of an angry crowd of squatters at a land sale, and borne himself badly, though antagonistic to all. But this was another affair, and the excited crowd around reminded him of what he had read of battle-fields, where the hungry wolves stand a little way off to wait their time of carnage.

And now the evening breeze came up and began to blow his raft up the bayou, leaving him no other prospect than to spend the night upon the water, surrounded by these creatures, maddened by the smell of blood. How he wished himself by the side of his good horse that stood gazing upon him, in the twilight, as if in mute astonishment at his master's movements. Ah, Colonel! your last quarter section has been entered, and your brethren will never drop the sprig of evergreen into your open grave. All this time the fight continued, and even increased in fury.

The military tactics of the alligator tribe is far more simple than Scott's. It only consists in catching your opponent's jaw in yours, then lancing his side with your tail. What thrashing machines those tails would make! While the raft floated along, the scene of fight was continually shifted, so as to keep it conveniently near, it being understood by both parties that the spoils were to be the victor's, and so said spoils himself understood by their anxiety to keep him in plain view. Once he approached near a point of land that jutted out from the bank, so near that had

he possessed a stick he could have reached it; but he was powerless, and on he went, the victim of destiny, and still the rivals fought, and still the speculator looked on. The ferry-boat was now out of sight. A turn in the land hid his horse, who gave him a loud neigh by way of good-night. Darkness settled over him, and the horrors of his situation began to work upon his mind. One last thought of home and wife and children, no more to hail his coming; and the speculator sank down upon his tottering raft, folded his arms, and a few minutes more would have ended his fate, for he felt that the power to preserve his balance was fast leaving him. But suddenly a light flashed upon his eyes, he heard a loud, harsh voice exclaiming, "Halloo, boys! a bull fight, as I'm a man;" and invigorated by hope, he sprung to his feet, and hailed the new comers. They were fishermen, by torchlight, and their fortunate arrival saved his life. Another half hour, and he was sitting at the ferryman's table, his horse up to his eyes in corn and fodder, and at least one grateful heart silently praising God for a great deliverance.
